

# **Thomas William Lee**

## **Private 9909, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion**

### **Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry**

**Thomas William Lee** was born in on 19 June 1882 in Norwoods Yard, Amersham, the son of Charles Lee, a farm labourer, and his wife Ellen Maria, (née Picton), and baptised on 17 September 1882.

In the 1901 Census<sup>1</sup> Thomas, aged 18, was recorded living as a boarder with William Talbot and his wife Emily at 48 Townfield Yard, Chesham. On 30 June 1907 Thomas, a bachelor and boot riveter of 48 Townfield Yard, son of Charles Lee (deceased), married Alice Wheeler, aged 20, of 260 Waterside, Chesham, daughter of Joseph Wheeler, carter. They were married by certificate at the Hinton Baptist Chapel in Chesham.<sup>2</sup> The 1911 Census records Thomas, aged 28, living in a three-roomed house in Waterside, Chesham with his wife Alice aged 23 and son Alfred aged 1 year and 1 month, the only survivor of 3 children. Thomas worked at home as a boot riveter, probably as an outworker for one of the Boot and Shoe factories in Chesham.

Thomas enlisted in the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry in Chesham (date unknown). August 1914 saw the regiment in Ahmednagar, India, under the command of 17th Indian Brigade of 6th (Poona) Division, Indian Army. On the 27 November 1914 the Regiment moved to Mesopotamia (Iraq). The Mesopotamian Expeditionary Force was essentially fighting the Turks and their German Allies. They took Basra and then Kurnah and, in late May 1915, under General Sir Charles Townshend, they prepared to attack the Turkish Base at Amara. By the end of September 1915 the Turks were defeated at **Kut-el-Amara**, but enough of them escaped to regroup at **Ctesiphon** just 20 miles from Baghdad. The **Battle of Ctesiphon** was a turning point and the Anglo-Indian forces were heavily defeated. Townshend's Division was then forced to retreat back to Kut, where they were subjected to a five month siege by the Turks, during which nearly 20,000 members of the British Army were killed or wounded.

The Battalion was captured after surrender of the garrison at **Kut-el-Amara** on the 29 April 1916. A Provisional Battalion was formed from the reinforcements and was attached to 28th Indian Brigade, 6th Poona Division. This Provisional Battalion was renamed the 1st Battalion on 6 July 1916.

Britain would invade again with an Anglo-Indian army that was led by Lieutenant General Sir Stanley Maude. Maude took Baghdad on March 11, 1917.

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<sup>1</sup> Details of the 1891 Census have not been included in the main body of the text as they are confusing and open to question. They show Thomas, aged 8, living in Townfield Yard in the household of James Lee, 36, and his wife Maria. Thomas is listed as their child, along with Emily 13, John 6 and Florrie 3. A 'lodger', James Lee, 66, a bricklayer, is almost certainly their grandfather, as all the details fit. Thomas's father Charles, who appears to have died in 1897, cannot be found anywhere in the Census for that year. Charles's brother James Lee, a bricklayer born c1851, whose wife is also called Mary, can be found in consecutive Censuses including 1891 living at Bury End, Amersham, so cannot be James Lee of Townfield Yard. If, however, the head of household was erroneously listed as James rather than Charles, as he should have been, then all the details fit. Thus when Thomas is lodging with the Talbots in 1901, he has with him his young sister Florrie. A further possible theory involves Emma or Emily Picton or Lee, the daughter of Ellen Maria Picton before she married Charles Lee. If she, Thomas's half-sister, was William Talbot's bride, that would account neatly for Thomas and Florrie being with the Talbots in 1901.

<sup>2</sup> The Hinton Baptist Chapel was the first to be built in Chesham, in 1701. However, the marriage took place in the new building, designed by John Wills of Derby, and erected in 1897-8 in Red Lion Street, where it still stands.

Apart from human enemies, the army also had to contend with sickness and the climate and there are many references in the Regiment's *Chronicle*<sup>3</sup> to deaths from enteric fever, cholera and dysentery, while in July a temperature of 126 degrees was recorded inside one of the battalion's tents. No information is available on how Thomas died, only that his death took place on 1 August 1917 and that he was buried in the Basra War Cemetery, Iraq.

He was awarded The British War Medal, 1914-18 and The Allied Victory Medal.

After the fall of Saddam Hussein the cemetery was targeted by vandals and looters, and some 4,000 headstones were broken, destroyed or missing.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission has begun working to renovate the Basra cemetery and has Iraqi security to guard it. Work is ongoing and it is their intention to start restoring the headstones when the security situation permits.



Thomas William Lee is remembered with Honour  
Basra War Cemetery, Iraq, (grave ref. IV.A.2)

He is also remembered on the Chesham War Memorial.

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<sup>3</sup> Lt-Col AF Mockler-Ferryman, *The Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry Chronicle*, Vol 27 pp 66-68 and Vol 26, p 55.